

*1 Timothy 6:6-12, 17-19*

*word count 2,147*

Two Tales of One City—Bergen, Norway on a cool day in September.

*Tale One:* An older couple sits in the hotel buffet room by the sunny window overlooking the band shell in the park. Other restaurant windows have light-filtering shades pulled down, but this couple’s is up, and they hold one hand against the glare, and eat with the other.

The sun is streaming across my table as well, so I get up, walk over, and pull down the shade. They are very surprised, though grateful. The man, who wears a neat cardigan sweater, says, “Good morning. Lovely day, isn’t it? I hope you are having a pleasant day?” His wife nods with a shy smile, hands folded in her lap at my approach. He speaks with an English working class accent. His wife then talks in a complimenting lilt: “The sun was in our eyes, but we don’t want to complain—they are so busy. Are you sure the hotel won’t mind your changing their shades?”

I assure them that the hotel would want them to be comfortable, and I sit back down to my version of a Norwegian buffet—fruit, *no* herring, Jarlsberg cheese, lingonberries and a small pastry.

The husband in his navy cardigan greets every person who walks by his table. “Good morning. Lovely day, isn’t it?” The waitress approaches and he points to a fork sitting on a fresh napkin, and he says, “I didn’t use that fork.” The wife nods in assent. The Norwegian waitress stares at it for a moment, and then gets what he means. He is a man who doesn’t want to be a bother, to take up space, or claim for himself more than the smallest of needs. He is offering her something that he hopes will cause her less work—one less thing to clean. She smiles, gently picks up the fork on the clean napkin and carries it ceremoniously out of his sight to where she dumps it into the slop bucket with everything else.

Husband to wife: “Would you like to go out walking for a bit today, dear? It is such a nice day for a walk.”

“Maybe later,” she says. “Maybe. I want to have a sit-down in the lobby for a while. It is so elegant, I can’t get over it.” It is a Radisson with a capital, “R.” But, these are the humble on holiday. Their great sin in life is in being too afraid to claim their right to embrace and run headlong into taking hold of life that is really life in the here and now—participating fully in wonders beyond the doors of a room set aside for waiting, and out into a world built for embracing, living and loving, hurting and grieving, learning and being changed in that learning.

*Tale Two* is told in the breathtaking and rugged beauty of the city of Bergen—you start by taking the steepest funicular in the world to the top and look out over the bay and the old quarters, and you don’t ever want to come back down. Surprises are everywhere. At the base of the hill, the old Central Church stands, and its ground floor contains, curiously, “Adam and Eva’s Hair Salon.” No-one finds this odd except for Carl and me. Further on is the Bryggen—the old painted wooden buildings that have stood back from the wharves for centuries, and reach far into alleyways that once held rooms for sailors and fisherman, bars and brothels, and the center of the Hanseatic League in Norway when Bergen was the largest city. The bars are still operating, but the crude storefronts now offer Norwegian sweaters, linens, trolls, Viking themed gifts, and cheese slicers in the shape of a moose.

In the distance, the sound of electric guitars reverberates off the weathered architecture and floats across the bay to the Bryggen. Through fish markets and stalls, the old gothic

churchyard, and the wide street lined with stores that frames the central square, I walk, finally hearing the noise become music.

At the Viking statue in the central square, Torgallmenningen, the rock band is playing full volume, while the police brass band waits patiently their orderly turn to perform. The crowd is jumping up and down spasmodically; not in beat with the music, but with great feeling. I gradually begin to see that this is a huge gathering of hundreds of developmentally disabled young adults. The square is full, and the lead singer starts, “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life,” in Norwegian, leaving the audience to fill in the whistling parts, which they do, sort of. If you are a Monty Python fan, as I am, the use of this tune in this context would make your jaw drop.

A policewoman in uniform holds her trumpet and stands with her female partner’s arm linked through hers. I walked up and asked her to explain. She told me that these are sports teams and special groups of developmentally disabled youth and adults from all over Scandinavia that are being brought together to be honored in Bergen, and the police brass band is on hand to finish the celebration with the mayor of the city. During this weekend, these special teams of people will be put up in the best hotels and treated to meals in restaurants and outings in Bergen.

Kids are now onstage performing the actions to “The Farmer in the Dell,” while singing in Norwegian. The “farmer’s wife,” a young girl in a wheelchair, is spun in a circle by the cast when it is her turn, and she waves her hands in the air, smiling in delight.

There were few surprises in the story—as expected, the dog took the cat, the cat took the mouse, the mouse took the cheese, and predictably, the cheese stood alone.

The “farmer,” a young man who was if anything, extremely enthusiastic in his rendition of the farm-family that just keeps on acquiring, finished by bounding up and down across the stage as his wife, family and bits of livestock joined him in jumping or spinning as the music wound up faster and faster. Their friends in the audience were doing the same. The crowd became one.

Suddenly, a digitalized techno-pop dimension was added as the tempo increased. You have not experienced anything until you have seen and heard a techno-pop Farmer in the Dell performed by developmentally disabled kids in Norwegian.

The family and friends of these young people, surprised and drawn in by the high energy, also started jumping up and down, smiling, twisting, and dancing with each other. The police brass band looked on and started swaying, some of them looking a little embarrassed in their uniforms, but passing smiles back and forth nonetheless. The focus moved from the stage as people started looking at each other, as if to say, “Are we all feeling this?” I was filming as much as I could, and found myself weeping as I did.

The Spirit had descended and angels danced in the streets, paved if not with gold, then with the generosity of a people who choose to honor all who dwell among them.

It was hard for me to draw myself away, and emotional as well. I met Carl on the street outside the hotel, and I told him the story as we went inside to dress for dinner.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the husband and wife from this morning. They were sitting in the hotel lobby looking quietly and serenely out at the world from the other side of glass windows. Their polite breakfast smiles still adorned their faces.

Today’s scripture is difficult to reconcile with the stories of these two very different events that happened most recently on a cool, September day in Norway. I know it.

The Pastoral Epistles make much more sense if we assume, as many scholars have for the past century, that these letters were written in Paul’s name by a senior church officer, or later follower, possibly in Ephesus. The unknown author wrote to encourage and advise those

charged with local responsibility to maintain orthodoxy in congregations. Imbedded in the text there may be a number of fragments of genuine Pauline documents. This is not likely one of those.

It is the concluding part of a pious homily instructing church people how to conduct themselves as leaders of their Christian communities in very uncertain and difficult circumstances.

Several problems crop up in this segment of the pastoral letter, but one seems dominant: the struggle for enough money to live on and prosper in the work of ministry, rather than in worldly wealth.

The second coming was still a significant part of the church's doctrine, but a modifying clause temporizes its imminence: "which he will bring about at the right time." The urgency had gone; the church had finally accepted that Jesus was not returning any time soon, as they had thought. Now then, how must they learn to live in the world? And, living in the world does have economic implications. The providence of God rather than the uncertainty of riches will be their security. Good works, generosity and sharing shape the economy of the church, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

Yes, I know that to interpret this scripture according to the theology implied therein, I need to point out that this "life that is really life," is a reference to a life to come in resurrection, but what if we could also speak of "life that is really life," in the here and now?

Life is hard and full of uncertainty today, as it was in the churches that first heard these words. Economic downturns, ruined fortunes and finances were everywhere. How were people going to live their lives in times like these?

And yes, again—the scriptures are hard to reconcile with the stories I have just told, except for this one very important thing: Given the difficulty of the times we are in, and given that we are all affected by them—how are we going to live, in this other sense of the concluding words, "the life that is really life?"

Is life so uncertain and unsettling that you will find yourself looking out at the world, like the humble on holiday, committing the great sin in life of being too afraid to claim your right to embrace and run headlong into taking hold of life that is really life, here and now—real stuff—participating fully in wonders beyond the doors of a room set aside for waiting, and out into a world built for embracing, living and loving, hurting and grieving, learning and being changed in that learning?

Even an author writing in the name of Paul addressed these uncertainties: "We brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these."

Yes, everything these days is upside down. But what are you going to say you did during these days when you look back?

At times like these, what if we give up our fears and just go out and walk headlong into it all—walk with the noise reverberating all around us; walk until finally we can hear noise become music. I think I did that one day recently. In the breathtaking and rugged beauty of the city of Bergen, I met a crowd that knew about the life that is really life—here and now, Spirit filled, hundreds of them who knew that they brought nothing into the world, and would take nothing out of it; but given food and clothing, they showed how we could be more than content with these.

The Spirit dances to a tune no-one expects, but then expectation, rote, routine, a status-quo or mundanity are not the clubs where you would even look for the Spirit to come up, tap you on the shoulder and ask for the next dance.

Life that is really life—real, rich, full. What other way is there, at least for the here and now, to live it? It isn't found in the fearful places inside us that keep us from going about our lives. No matter what is next, there are places, if you go out and look, where the Spirit still descends and angels dance in the streets, paved if not with gold, then with the generosity of those, perhaps like yourselves, who in their own understanding of their faith, choose to honor and look after all who dwell among them, and be looked after in return, not worrying about tomorrow. I saw it happen.

***Sermon Resource:***

Commentaries on the Revised Common Lectionary, Proper 21C, A ministry of the Anglican Diocese of Montreal, Canada

***Scripture for Sunday, September 26, 2010***

***1 Timothy 6:6-12, 17-19***

6 Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; 7 for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; 8 but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. 9 But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. 10 For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains. 11 But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. 12 Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. - 17 As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. 18 They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, 19 thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.